N.A.A.S.R. 2024 Annual Meeting, "Interlocutions"
Panel on "Interrelation and Cognition"

PRESENTATION OUTLINE

Stories of and about religion usually begin in the past. I say "usually" as a nod to the postmodern critique of "searching for origins" that has doubtlessly inspired some to rethink the paradigm of beginnings and ends, but the truth is that most of us who study religion *historicize* and *contextualize*. We situate the new in the old, and the old in the older.

Given this tendency, I think it's fair to say that religious studies as a discipline is deeply enmeshed in a set of assumptions about what history is, how we can and are supposed to use it, and what certain concepts like "past" and "future" even mean. Most of the time we take these assumptions for granted and don't pause to interrogate them. But in the last few decades, various historians, anthropologists, and social theorists have started to examine how these assumptions can enable certain kinds of epistemic and institutional violence, particularly when dealing with subaltern and indigenous pasts that do not or cannot fit into the mechanics of empirical disciplinary history.

This "struggle to fit" in history can emerge for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, it's because the archive itself (which has often been funded and/or supported by the state) excludes those who are marginalized, oppressed, or erased by the state, society at large, or its institutions. Sadiya Hartman addressed these archival cavities in her famous work, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), when she wrote that "the very effort to represent the situation of the subaltern reveals the provisionality of the archive as well as the interests that shape it and thereby determine the emplotment of history." Recently, the co-published "Theses on Theory and History" (2020) have more systematically criticized the habit that historians have of treating archival evidence as "embodying the real and containing the truth of social relations." (Kleinberg et. al., 2020)

Other times, this "struggle to fit" appears when subalterns want to populate their literal accounts of the past with entities and agencies that don't exist for scholars in the West, such as gods, goddesses, spirits, or supernatural events (or in my fieldwork, planets and constellations). In fact, this tough spot is where many of us in religious studies can find ourselves. Typically we deal with these situations by collecting these different "agencies" like chess pieces and tossing them in the box of "myth" and "belief." This move, however, can be problematic for the way in which it denies indigenous and

subaltern peoples' worlds and realities. Vanessa Watts, who is Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe, chastises this habit of relegating Indigenous histories to the category of myth as one that represents and assists colonial violence, writing that, "In order for colonialism to operationalize itself, it must attempt to make Indigenous peoples stand in disbelief of themselves and their histories."

Finally, sometimes the very logics of time, linearity, and progression that we do history with are turned on their heads in the cultures, societies, and peoples we study. I am reminded of Rane Willerslev's description of indigenous Siberians who, when they "eat fly-agaric mushrooms and travel to the world of the dead…often report being away for months although only a few hours have passed in this world." This "being away," Willerslev explains, does not simply happen in peoples' minds (in subjectivity), but is an authentic away-ness, no different from going away to Australia or the grocery store. Now how do you write history for people who can't agree that four hours equals four hours?

This brings us to the task at hand today. What do we do with these obstacles to "historicize" as scholars of religion? *Should* we do anything? Even at the height of subaltern studies and decolonial theory, scores of historians and other scholars continued to strongly defend the status quo of disciplinary history and its empirical methods. Dipesh Chakrabarty, while acknowledging the shortcomings of secular histories and critiquing the "naturalism of historical time," ultimately concluded in 1997 that subalterns "need the idea of history and the historicist mode of thinking" because History with a capital "H" is the operating system of the world's most powerful institutions. Parallely, Meera Nanda, in her work *Prophets Facing Backward* (2003), insisted that only a fierce commitment to empirical positivism can resist the violence of right-wing religious fundamentalism (for instance, the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya was rooted in a "mythical" history of Ayodhya as the birthplace of Lord Ram — a history that, for someone like Nanda, can easily be debunked or at least unsettled through empiricist methods).

More recently, however, a number of scholars, driven to give a voice to those whose stories and worlds are marginalized by the project of historicism, have refused to content themselves with the directive to just "leave it be." These writers have developed theoretical resources that researchers like myself can use to face various obstacles in "historicizing." To approach the erasures of the archive, for instance, Leela Prasad has developed the hermeneutical technique of "sense reading" (2020), and to resist the mythologizing of subaltern histories, scholars like Vanessa Watts (2013) and Marisol de la Cadena (2015) have worked to radically incorporate non-human agencies into historical

narrative in innovative ways. In the sections below, I describe these approaches and how they have transformed how I approach my own work.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. de la Cadena, Marisol. *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

   In this monograph, de la Cadena is disinterested in the epistemological barriers to "true history," choosing instead to excavate "the archive" as situated in a set of specific power relationships. The archive for de la Cadena is a site of paradox; referencing Achille Mbembe, she reminds us that the archive "is necessary to the existence of the state, but in its capacity to record and therefore remind the state of misdeeds that it would rather forget, the archive also poses a threat to the state." (120) This paradox rears its head in the box of over 400 documents de la Cadena receives from her "co-laborer" Mariano, documents that "denounce the transgressions of state rules by local and regional representatives of the state." (120) de la Cadena's first instinct is to use this "archive" to tell a story about peasant struggle against landowning elites. Yet Mariano prefers to simply talk, "without the written script that the documents provided." (119) Thus de la Cadena is faced with a unique situation, in which she must trace an "indigenous archivism" that is (1) at odds with traditional methods of historical archiving, and (2) possible only through alliance with other, more-than-human "earth beings."

2. Prasad, Leela. *The Audacious Raconteur: Sovereignty and Storytelling in Colonial India*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020.

   In this book, Prasad relentlessly excavates "that acre of ground" that remains sovereign even in the face of oppressive colonial hegemony. She does this by studying the stories and writings of four "audacious raconteurs" in colonial India who, despite being obscured or marginalized by the hegemonic powers that be, creatively critique power "without…declaring an intent to be audacious." (9) These critiques are, however, "hidden transcripts" that require special techniques of reading. In particular, Prasad develops and demonstrates a technique of "sense reading" that utilizes intuition and cultural commonality to read between (or behind) the lines of a dominant script.

3. Watts, Vanessa. "Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)."

Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society 2, no. 1 (2013): 20-34.

In this essay, Watts rejects the ways in which indigenous histories, especially their creation histories, are abstracted into the domain of "thought." After recounting two Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe creation histories, she emphasizes "that these two events took place. They were not imagined or fantasized. This is not lore, myth or legend. These histories are not longer versions of 'and the moral of the story is…' This is what happened." (21) Watts then proceeds out of these histories to show that "land is alive and thinking and that humans *and* [emphasis added] non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts." (21) To phrase it differently, all agency is "landed" and all land (broadly understood) is agentive. In doing so, she not only reconstitutes non-humans as "active members of society," but also challenges the Euro-Western compulsion to divide epistemology from ontology, offering the notion of "Place-Thought" as a replacement to this divide.

APPLICATION

My work involves an ethnographic exploration of lived astrology in India and elsewhere. I ask questions like: How do people use astrology to make meaning out of the past or future? How does astrological knowledge and thinking infuse itself into the everyday for ordinary people and professionals? And crucially, how do/have people relate(d) to the concept of time and to the march of history through astrology and astrological configurations?

I have found Watts' push to show that "land is alive and thinking" and that "non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" helpful for imagining how the sky might also be alive and thinking (indeed, in the communities I work with, celestial bodies and solar systems are described as expressions of cosmic "thoughts"). de la Cadena has pushed me further to imagine an "astrological" history that is in excess of an archive, in part due to its alliance with "sky beings" (planets and constellations). Finally, in line with Prasad, I have used my familiarity with the communities I work with in the present to "sense" how astrology and astrological events (for instance, the visit of Halley's Comet to Earth) have shaped a kind of historical consciousness that we can't access directly, but that can be found "in between the lines."